

# Competitive Grant Projects at IDRC

April 2006

The Evaluation Unit received five evaluations in the past year on competitive grant projects from Program Initiatives across the Centre (see Box 1). The Unit commissioned a review to look across these evaluations for commonalities in order to highlight issues the Centre should consider in future. While the five evaluations were not commissioned with the same terms of reference, asking a common question of the evaluations produced the same information across the evaluations, suggesting broad applicability: “what worked, for whom and in what context?”

Below is an overview of key findings. All five projects succeeded to a degree and worked more or less well along the same dimensions. First, common findings will be presented. Then a summary of findings around four themes of ongoing interest to the Centre is discussed: These core issues are: management, capacity development, policy and use, and networks. The full paper is available from the Evaluation Unit.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Common Findings/Lessons

Competitive grant projects are seen as research and capacity *learning systems* that succeed to the extent that their *complexity and fragility are recognized and accounted for*.

**Competitive grant projects can never be the straightforward arrangements they are often expected to be.** They are always going to be *labour-intensive to manage, expensive to implement, and more effective where they are grounded* in some wider institutional or programmatic framework.

**Competitive grant projects are not inherently self-sustaining.** IDRC is neither a granting institution nor a university. For this reason, competitive grants operated through the Centre are usually a series of fairly light-handed *individual learning events* strung together as *transitory and nonformal arrangements*. Their success, therefore, is dependent directly on those involved at each point in the decision-action chain and on the level of *responsibility each accepts to initiate, monitor and interact around activities*. A competitive grant project is effective to the extent that it is not left to “happen”, without specific systems and resources in place to push it along.

**Competitive grant projects regularly struggle under the weight of too many and too substantial “intended outcomes” resting on too fragile a base.** More often perhaps a function of enthusiastic marketing rather than explicit design, competitive grant project descriptors suggest they “will do it all”. However, competitive grants are loosely-coupled arrangements, providing relatively few material resources and fewer technical inputs, over a usually short time horizon, to a relatively few people unconnected to IDRC or to each other in any reinforcing way. By setting the bar too high, these expectations tend often to produce either overly negative reports of “missed” results; or overly positive ones full of unsubstantiated “satisfaction” statements. Neither situation assesses the project fairly on the basis of what it could and did do.

<sup>1</sup> Anne Bernard, *Lessons from IDRC evaluations on Competitive Grants: A review of five evaluations*. 2006.

**Competitive grant projects fall short or collapse as development interventions because they are too ‘light-handed’ in conforming to good development and management standards, and learning principles.** In IDRC, where they are second-tier tasks, competitive grants tend not to get the same level of relevant professional attention that goes into research projects.

## **2 Thematic Findings/Lessons**

Not all five evaluations dealt with all these themes, but they were sufficiently common to warrant serious consideration for the future. Only selected findings are included here.

### **2.1 Management of Competitive Grant Projects**

The management of competitive grants is invariably complicated by a tenuous human and financial resource base, multiple actors with often unclear or competing agendas, and a multi-faceted task environment of funds administration, awardee selection, maintenance and project support, etc.

#### ***Management arrangements that appear to work:***

- Clarifying and establishing agreement with all management/funding collaborators with respect to the rationale, priorities and “bottom-line” expectations of the project; confirming that these are consistent with their respective organizational goals and mandates.
- Basing the project in an established institution with a proven record as manager of multi-dimensional, loosely-coupled outreach projects; and ensuring competent staff with dedicated time for the project, not expected to “fold it into” other work.
- Ensuring a selection and review process that is professionally credible, technically competent, contextually relevant and transparent.
- Finding a “just right” balance in terms of meeting the objectives of the project in bringing in the appropriate candidates and adding value to the exercise by serving as a learning exercise, while not overweighting the front-end in terms of time, money and good will of resource persons.
- Acknowledging, respecting and accommodating the value-added and in-kind costs of the external “experts” contributing to the competitive grants project.

#### ***Management arrangements that are problematic:***

- Not being explicit, honest and modest about the place of the competitive grants in the wider life of the collaborating donor/management organization, thereby taking on too much, with overly vague conditions, and failing to put the appropriate safeguards and resources in place.
- Underestimating the labour intensive, professionally demanding and typically uncertain nature of competitive grant projects.
- Outsourcing management responsibility to untested, marginally capable organizations, without sufficient institutional assessment.
- Allowing ambiguous designation of competitive grants purpose, scope, level of commitment.

## ▪ 2.2 Capacity development

That competitive grant projects will develop the capacity of awardees in some way is a “given”, in theory. Even grants for senior researchers, where the objectives focus on knowledge generation, network building or policy influence, enhanced capacity for doing such things is implied. Competitive grants are typically “most beneficial” where they “helped me learn”. Unfortunately capacity development is also a “given” in practice, expected to happen without necessarily bringing together the elements necessary to enable it.

### ***Capacity building arrangements that appear to work:***

- Conceiving the overall design of the competitive grants project and all of the elements within it in terms of their implications for facilitating or impeding learning.
- Focusing on people/awardees already in a *learning mode* e.g., young researchers associated with a new IDRC project, senior researchers struggling to shift their analyses.
- Recognizing that people do not learn what they do not have the opportunity to engage with.

### ***Capacity building arrangements that are problematic:***

- Providing insufficient resources of money, time and compensatory professional benefit.
- Not linking the competitive grants conceptually or practically into IDRC’s wider agenda.
- Over-estimating the speed, linearity and uni-dimensionality of organizational learning, institution building or policy systems change and the extent to which these complex goals can be realized through the typically light-handed mechanism of a competitive grants project.

## 2.3 Policy Influence and Utilization

Policy influence and utilization issues are problematic in competitive grants because they plan for/claim to do more than is reasonable, because outcomes are rarely defined in outcomes terms at the level of the project, and because they are not expressly planned to ensure that utilization ends are matched with the means of achieving them.

### ***Policy and utilization arrangements that appear to work:***

- Clarity within IDRC as to why and how a competitive grants mechanism will support its corporate mandate and programming goals:
  - targeted themes to match changing regional policy priorities appear to have a better chance of leading to some policy influence;
  - targeted commissioned *studies* appear to have more chance of policy influence than projects selected through competition; and
  - planning for use through association with/integration into on-going IDRC projects and networks facilitates application of new skills and knowledge.

### ***Policy and utilization arrangements that are problematic:***

- Thinking in the short-term and expecting links into policy and practice to happen:
  - devising competition themes without sufficient reference to “why and where next”;
  - providing insufficient time or resources for post-project dissemination of results;
  - not including development of skills and knowledge expressly geared to implementation or application of results; and
  - failing to provide support for laboratories, databases, libraries and other support services to encourage dissemination and utilization.

## 2.4 Networks

Across the five evaluations, creating networks was not a well-realized outcome. The problem with the concept of a network is that its meaning, structures and functions, and expected impacts are typically too vague: competitive grant projects refer to “networking” as both the process and mechanism for implementation, and as an outcome – awardees will network to learn and become a network in consequence. While both of these expectations might be accurate and effective, the five evaluations reviewed suggest they are neither.

### *Networking arrangements that appear to work:*

- Proactively bringing awardees together in a facilitated, purposive activity that will establish linkages on the basis of professional exchange provides the space (but not assurance) for that potential.
- Designing and managing collaborative multi-donor competitive grants that promote, enable and build networking as the modus operandi of the programme.
- Providing awardees the “hooks” on which to evolve a network relationship, such as regular opportunities for dialogue; core materials available on an interactive website; helping identify or create common activity threads among awardees; encouraging and facilitating (through financing) meetings outside the project.

### *Networking arrangements that are problematic:*

- Not being clear about the “why and how” of the networking idea:
  - failing to ensure that it is more than simply a rhetorical substitute;
  - selecting designs likely to impede networking, e.g., competitive selection scattered over a wide range, geographically, topically or in terms of researcher capacity;
  - under-resourcing the minimal conditions of a network; and
  - failing to plan follow-up activities of the competitive grants in ways that promote informal sharing and collaboration as the seed of future networks.

#### **Box 1: The five evaluations reviewed (available from the Evaluation Unit):**

1. Advanced Education and Training Options Available to IDRC, George Tillman, April 2005.
2. Evaluation of “Central America in the World Economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, Fernando Loayza Careaga & Romulo Caballeros Otero, August 2005.
3. Ecohealth Research Awards Program Tracer Study, Jessica White, January 2006.
4. RoKS Competitive Grants Program: Review and Recommendations, Michael Graham, January 2006.
5. Review of the Role of IDRC in the Scholarship Fund for Palestinian Refugee Women in Lebanon, Gail Larose, February 2006.